

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN THE UPANISHADS

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The Upanishads represent a high philosophical thinking in India. Much of what they say is through anecdotes and parables. One of these anecdotes pertains to Maciketas, the young son of the sage Vajasravasa in the Kaupanishad. One day the young man found his father giving away cows, old and sterile, at a sacrifice. When they were being given away as

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uses the word Sraddha. The young man who thought that at the end of a life, one must go to a place called Lokah. Thinking that his father may probably be giving away cows to whom he would give a sacrifice. When he did it, he asked a question probably, "Unto death I give my cows." The sage, they had to go to the abode of death, the god was the life of the people. And the young man

When he returned after three days waiting for him without food and drink for the past three days. He felt sorry that a Brahmin of all should have had to suffer like this. As an atonement for this he offered him three boons. Against two of these the young man asked for sundane things. The first of these was the pacification of the god of death. Maciketas wanted that his father to be kind to him and greet him with his anger gone when he would return to him from the abode of death. The second was about the explanation of the fire which leads to heaven, the fire by which those whose world is heaven attain immortality. Both of these the God of Death granted him readily. The third was rather tricky. Through this the young man enquired of the God of Death to explain to him as to what happens to a man after death. He wants him to clear the doubt as to whether a man continues to exist after death

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or not. The God of Death first tried to sidetrack the question by persuading the young man not to persist in his question

Don't ask me, Naciketas about death, with an offer of many an material thing but finding him adamant proceeds to answer it. It is the body which dies and not the soul, says he. With the verses which the Gita too reproduces he reiterates that the soul cannot be cut, be burnt, be moistened or dried. It is permanent, omnipresent, stationery, unmoving and ever present. It changes bodies as one changes clothes. It means, therefore, that a person in the form of the soul is still present, though physically he may have ceased to exist.

Death according to the Kathopanishad is something which concerns the material body. Not only death, birth, growth and decay also concern that only. Any kind of material body, inanimate or animate, which is subject to birth is also subject to death. Birth is followed by death. This is the inexorable logic of the phenomenal world. Evolution implies change. We are evolving constantly from one state to another.

The materialistic thinkers in course of their investigation of the relative and the phenomenal world have not found any thing which is unchangeable and immortal and therefore they would not concede any such thing as immortality. They cannot visualize a situation which is unchangeable. Their entire thinking is confined to the conditions of time and space and causation. These are the inexorable limitations and within these limitations nothing can be immortal and unchangeable.

What the God of Death points out to the young enquirer Naciketas in the Kathopanishad is that there is something beyond the phenomenal world and that something called the Soul or Atman is immutable. It is the background to the ego which is unchangeable and immortal. It is very difficult to grasp it, says the Upanishad, to appreciate it, it lying hidden in the cavity of the heart. It can be perceived only with a very sharp intellect :

esa sarvesu bhutesu gadhotma na prakasate /

drsyate tv agryaya buddhya suksmaya suksmadarsibhih//

In the midst of all the changes, physical, sensuous, mental or intellectual there is a constant quantity which is one's own being. One passes through

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various changes like the changes from babyhood to childhood, from childhood to youth, from youth to old age when the young body has gone away and one has a mature body. Every seventh year all the particles of the body change and get renewed but still one is the same person, the identity never changes. The question is : What is the foundation of this identity? It cannot be matter for , matter is constantly changing. It cannot be energy, for, energy too is changing. It could only be one's own consciousness. Of course, the states of consciousness change, they are always in a state of flux, but the source of consciousness is the same. This source of consciousness is the basic consciousness and is the constant quantity. This constant quantity in Sanskrit is called Atman. It is very difficult to render it in any other language. The word soul & for this is not enough. Nor is the word ego. Both these signify the individualized manifestations of the constant quantity. It means that unchangeable something within beings which is the source of intelligence and existence and upon which our relative existence depends. The Atman or the permanent entity is birthless, because one can never think of its birth. One may try to go as far back as possible in one's imagination and try to think of oneself as conscious of non-existence. But one just cannot hope to do so because consciousness or existence are simultaneous, it is just one and the same. As one cannot think of one's beginning or of the time when one did not exist, one cannot think of the time when one shall cease to exist. One is, therefore, deathless. This is the strongest proof of one's immortal nature. One cannot think of one's non-existence. One can think of one dead body in imagination but one's consciousness is there and therefore one is not dead. One can think of one's dead body but one cannot think of the destruction of one's self-consciousness. Consciousness is the constant quantity which is the essence of one's being. It is deathless, as explained by the Upanishads.

As has been said earlier, the constant quantity is very difficult to grasp. The Upanishad very rightly says that not many are able to hear of it; of whom many, even when they hear of it, can comprehend it;

wonderful is a man, when found, who is able to teach it;
wonderful is who it comprehends it, when taught by an able
teacher :

śrovanayapi bahubhir ya na labhyah

śrūvanto 'pi bahavo yam na vidyuh/

śaccaryo vakta kusalo'sya labdha

śaccaryo jñata kusalanusistah//

The Gita also echoes the same idea when it says :

śaccaryavet paśyati kascid enam

śaccaryaved vadati tathaiiva anyah/

śaccaryavaś caiva anyah śrnoti

śrūtvā 'py enam veda na caiva kascit//

"Rarely one beholds the Atman as a wonder, rarer still one speaks and hears him as a wonder and scarcely one who understands it even on hearing him.

The difficulty of grasping Atman or the constant quantity becomes apparent when we notice there is no tangible object or abstract idea to compare it with. That is why the Upanisads refer to it as 'not this, not this'. It may well be pointed out here that not to talk of an entity like the Atman, even to give an exact description of gross physical objects is difficult, the objects like a man or an animal. The same can be said of the experience. If one has to describe the taste of a mango, one may find no words for that. Can one say mango tastes like peach, is sweeter than apple, not sour like peach, is not bitter. Will that describe the taste of a mango? Finally one may have to end up by saying that a mango tastes like mango. Similar is the difficulty in describing the nature of Atman. Rarely does one understand and become capable of experiencing the unique entity and when one does experience it, it just mystifies one. It is so easy and so simple. It is just as easy as eating a mango to know its taste but before eating, one must have to get the mango; in the case of Atman the spiritual preparations required to experience it. The realized being after struggling hard knows, as said above, it to be so simple. He can see Atman everywhere. But he cannot describe it. The Atman is he himself, tat tvam asi, tat tvam asi, as says the Upanisad, that art thou, that art thou. If in spite of it somebody can describe it, he must be a wonderful teacher indeed : śaccaryo 'sya vakta. So is the listener or the seeker after it : śaccaryo'sya labdha.

What a wonderful combination it is : The teacher of immortality and the student of immortality! How is the teacher to teach the pupil? He cannot describe it, as said above, it is beyond all determinants. He has only to prepare the pupil by gradually preparing him mentally, morally and spiritually to have a feel of it, to realize it.

By argument one cannot explain what exists after death : *naisa tarkena matir spaneya*. No argument will be convincing. There cannot be any scientific proof that Atman exists after death, it is ever present in the sense that it cannot be verified, observed and demonstrated by sense perceptions; for the obvious reasons that the immortal element in us is beyond the reach of the senses. The senses work in and through that immortal part, but the senses in their turn can never reveal it. It is, as says the Upanisad, It is finer than the minute and grosser than the gross : *anor anyan mahato mahian*. It is said to be seated in the heart of every being : *atmasya jantor nihito guha am*.

For a fuller appreciation of the concept of death in the Upanisads one may have to turn to the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul. Interestingly, in no other Vedic text than the Upanisads can the doctrine of soul's transmigration be traced, though the Upanisads themselves ascribe it to the Rgveda. The Bhadaranyakopanisad speaks of Vasudeva, the poet of the Rgveda recognizing himself as Brahman and as a proof of his former births as Manu and Surya. In the Rgveda itself it was this much that the good people after death continue their existence with gods under the control of Yama. Immortal life with gods is presented in so many hymns of the Rgveda, especially the older ones as a peculiar gift of the grace of the gods. Of the fate of the wicked obscure indications are contained in the Rgveda. They are predestined for that abysmal place, are hurled by Indra and Soma to the pit or bottomless darkness. Coming to the Brahmana period in the process tracing the historical development of the doctrine of transmigration, that the idea of recompense is formulated in a contrast to the Vedic conception of an indiscriminate and indefinite felicity of the pious. Being the texts on rituals, the Brahmanas offer for their accomplishment reward and punishment for their commission or omission, besides assigning different degrees of compensation to the departed ones proportionate to their knowledge and action. A further development of this is the concept in meeting with the same type of actions in the other world as one has been

performing in this world. The *Satapatha Brahmana* very tellingly expresses the idea in the words : "Whatever food a man eats in this world, by the same is he eaten again in the other".

The doctrine transmigration or the journey of the soul after leaving the body is described in two texts with verbal similarity in two of the Upanisads, the *Chandogya* 5.3-10 and the *Brhadaranyaka* 6.2 and is called by Indian authorities as the *Pancagnividyā*, the doctrine of five fires which is a combination of the different parts, the doctrine of the five fires and the doctrine of the two ways. The Upanisadic text teaches double retribution, one by reward and punishment for good and bad actions in this world and the other by reward and punishment in the other. Carefully looked at it merely is a development of the Vedic thought where the future recompense is hinted at, the good dwell after death with the gods, etc. What is added in the Upanisads is the coming back of the people, in the form of their soul assuming another body on the earth and reaping the reward of their actions, good or bad, in the previous birth, the cycle continuing till true knowledge or enlightenment in the form of realization of one's own self dawns and one is released from the bondage of birth and death and gets liberated, *mukta*.

The Upanisads do recognize that in between the present existence and the future one, the present birth and rebirth, there are different worlds, the *lokas*, to which one moves, the worlds of gods, the *manes*, the *Gandharvas*, the worlds which are brilliantly lit and the worlds which are dark and dismal, the worlds full of bliss and the worlds without it. The narrative of *Naciketas* with which the present discussion ~~was~~ started also makes a reference to it. It is said ~~that~~ there that one gifting cows that are sterile and worn out goes to worlds called *anandas*, the worlds where there is no bliss : *ananda nama te lokas tan sa gacchati ta dadat*. The station in the *lokas* or worlds on death is determined by the proportion of the good or bad actions of a person in this world and his knowledge. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* explains it through one of the most celebrated of the philosophic seers *Tajnavalkya* in one of its most brilliant of the passages : "After the departure of the soul from the body the knowledge and the works of a person take him by the hand and his former experience, *purvaprajna*. As a caterpillar, after it has reached the tip of a leaf, makes a beginning upon another and

draws itself over towards it, so also the soul, after it has shaken off the body and freed itself from ignorance, fashions for itself newer, fairer form, whether it be of the fathers or the Gandharvas, or the gods or Prajapati or Brahman or other living beings.....in proportion as a man consists of this or that, just as he acts, just as he behaves, so will he be born. He who does good, will be born good, he who does evil will be born evil. Therefore in truth it is said : "Man is altogether and throughout composed of desire (Kama), in proportion to his desire so is his discretion so he performs acts(Karman-s); in proportion to his acts so does it result to him."

Of the different worlds the soul moves the world of the gods referred to as Devayana and the world of the fathers referred to as Pitryana are the most important. The pious and the good, it is said, go to the Devayana, the path of the gods. A detailed description of this found in the Chandogya Upanisad which says : "On the burning of the corpse the soul enters into the flame, thence to the day, thence into the bright half of the month, thence into the bright half of the year (the summer season), thence into the year, thence into the sun, thence into the moon, thence into the lightning and so finally into Brahman which is said to be the light of lights, jyotisham jyotih. In the world of fathers, called the Pitryana, the path of the fathers, the manes, to which repair the impious and the wicked, the soul enters the smoke, not the flame, the night, not the day, the dark half of the moon, not the bright, the 3 months of winter, not the summer, the akasa, the sky, not the sun and finally into the moon to remain there as long as a remnant of good works yet exists. According to the Kausitaki Upanisad "All those who depart from this world go without exception to the moon". There their knowledge is put to test, and according to the result they either go by the Devayana, the path of the gods which leads to Brahman without return or (the name Pitryana is not used there) they enter upon a new birth, "whether as a worm or a fly or a fish or a bird or a lion or a bear or a serpent or a tiger or a man or as something else". The above kind of enumeration is also found in the Chandogya Upanisad also. The Kathopanishad does not go in for the enumeration but expresses the idea in a nut-shell. Some souls, says it, enter the womb to have a body, others to the immovable objects, maybe the plants or the inert world of

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stones and slabs according to their work and knowledge. The Upanisad also teaches the transitoriness of the good works. So long as the good works last is one to be in the Devayana. With their exhaustion one is to return to the earth : ksine punye martyaloham visanti.

The Upanisadic seers were not satisfied with the discovery so diligently made by them of the movement of the soul from one body to the other as per the actions and as per the knowledge. Their effort was to discover a way by which ~~this movement~~ this movement could be stopped. No birth, no death, which is what immortality is. The secret of this they found in the discovery of their own self : atmanam anvicscha nihitam guhayam, 'look for your own self stationed within you', was their advice to the mankind. The self called Purusa or Brahman needs to be realized and one's identity merged with it to attain immortality. The Kathopanishad tries to explain it by different similes. Just as the one fire, after it has entered the world, though one, takes different forms, according to whatever it enters, so the eternal Atman. As the one Air, after it has entered the world, though one, takes different forms, according to whatever it enters, so the eternal Atman of all living beings, though one, assumes forms according to whatever it enters and is outside all forms. The Upanisadic idea can be understood better by referring to a very mundane phenomenon. The electric current that passes through a fan, a bulb, a refrigerator a heater and so on is the same, although because of difference in instruments through which it passes it manifests itself differently as air, light, cold, heat, etc. The Atma-tattva similarly remains the same, in spite of the different make-up of the different minds that it comes to function through. Thus it is that you are not me, nor am I you because my mind is constituted differently from yours. Yet our Atman is the same. Upanisadic literature furnishes many clues as an answer to the query of the young lad Naciketas which could be the query of any intelligent person, the query that has been

The Upanishads have not been written by one man, but by many sages of different ages and in different places. They are the result of a long and continuous process of spiritual discovery and teaching. The Upanishads are the heart of the Vedas, and they contain the highest wisdom of the Hindu religion. They teach the nature of the soul, the universe, and the path to liberation. The Upanishads are the foundation of the Hindu philosophy, and they have influenced the world of thought and religion for centuries.

soul which is said to transmigrate is not the all-pervading soul, Paramatman but the individual one, the Jivatman. The Upanisads use the word Atman for both leading to the confusion as to how the soul, the Ultimate Reality, the constant quantity, the Universal Consciousness, be subject to desires and the fruit of good or bad actions to receive which it has to take on a body. The other entity also called Atman in the Upanisads is analogous to what is called Lingasarira or Sukshmasarira in later Vedanta, the Subtle Body, the cumulative feelings and impressions, the Samskaras, which are not destroyed by death. These desires, impressions and feelings that persist, that take on a body as per their nature. They are the sign and accompaniment of individuality and do not perish till the individualized soul, the Jivatman, is finally merged in the Universal Soul, the Paratman. Till the time the veneer of Samskaras continues, continues the cycle of birth and death. It ceases only with the dawn of true enlightenment which is the realization of an individual's identity with the universal. The Samskaras which are personal to an individual do not exist then. So do no actions which again are personal. The being then delivered in the sense that there are no good or bad acts which have to bind him to have realization of their good or bad fruit. With the bondage gone, the being, the Jiva, is emancipated.

In the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad the sage Yajnavalkya in answer to a searching query of his intelligent wife who wanted to know the secret of immortality points out : "After death there is no consciousness", na pretya samijnasti. , for a person who has realized Brahman, he becomes Brahman himself. The imperishable, the indestructible, the avinasin, the amucchittidharman, Atman has after death no consciousness of matter. The Upanisadic literature furnishes many clues as an answer to the query of the young lad Nachiketas which could be the query of any intelligent person, the query that has been

with the mankind since times immorial as to what happens to a being after death, whether he continues to or not or whether there is continuity or cessation. The Upanisads are firm in their answer : There is continuity for those who are encircled by desires, *esa kamayamananam avastha*, who are ignorant of their true nature. They have to be born and reborn and reborn and have to assume forms as per their actions, good or bad. They may tarry for a while in the different worlds, the worlds for the good and the worlds for the bad, the *Devayana* and the *Pitryana*, but they have to come back to the earth to reap the fruit, proportionate to the quality of their actions, which may also determine their forms and the way of their life, pleasanter unpleasant, happy or unhappy. The soul of such person carries with it what has come to be known in later Vedanta as *lingasarira* or *Sukshmasarira*, the subtle body, the cumulative feelings and impressions before entering upon another body which is not destroyed by death. Since it is the sign and accompaniment of individuality, it can never perish till the individualized soul is finally merged in the universal. The soul with this vessel will continue to pass through the cycle of birth and death. For such beings it is continuity. There is cessation for those who have attained the true knowledge and are one with the Fullness, the *Purusa*, the Great Light which illumines everything, *tasya bhava sarvam idam vibhati*, the Supreme Being who is present in every one of us but still is not understood. The Upanisads show the path to the cessation, called immortality. The prayer of the seers there is :

asato ma sad gamaya

tamaso ma jyotir gamaya

mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya

Lead me from unreality to reality

Lead me from darkness to light

Lead me from death to immortality

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